

Analogue laws, digital streets: re-engineering Kenya's public order management framework for the Gen Z era

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ABSTRACT

Kenya's public order management has faced growing pressure with the emergence of Gen Z protests that are organized and sustained through digital platforms. Unlike conventional protests, these forms of mobilization can develop quickly, involve loosely connected groups and change direction with little warning, making policing approaches based on centralized intelligence, hierarchical coordination and reactive crowd control increasingly difficult to apply. This article was grounded on the governance theory and the procedural justice theory. Against this background, the study explored how Kenya's law enforcement agencies can adjust their public order management strategies to respond to digitally coordinated Gen Z protests effectively and lawfully, while strengthening accountability, institutional legitimacy and public trust. A qualitative documentary research design was adopted, drawing on 35–40 relevant documents published between 2017 and 2025, including legislation, institutional reports, human rights reports, academic studies and policy documents. The information gathered was analysed through qualitative content and thematic analysis, guided by Governance Theory and Procedural Justice Theory. The findings point to several challenges within the existing public order management approach, particularly in digital intelligence, inter-agency coordination, preparedness, communication, de-escalation and accountability. They also show that concerns about the use of force and the fairness with which protesters are treated can weaken public confidence in law enforcement institutions. Based on these findings, the study argues that Kenya's public order management framework needs to move beyond predominantly reactive and force-oriented practices towards a more proactive, flexible and rights-based approach that responds to the realities of digitally coordinated protests. It recommends strengthening digital intelligence and early-warning systems, improving coordination among relevant institutions, establishing effective dialogue and engagement mechanisms, enhancing training in de-escalation and procedural justice, and strengthening transparency and accountability in the management of public protests.

Keywords: Digital Mobilization, Gen Z Protests, Public Order Management, Law Enforcement Agencies, Protest Policing, Procedural Justice

I. INTRODUCTION

Public order management has emerged as a significant challenge for governance and national security. The digitally mobilized protests by young people have transformed civic participation and political engagement. The Generation Z youth in Kenya organize protests by use of digital platforms such as X, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp which enable swift transfer of information to a large number of people. An example of digital activism and its influence on contemporary political participation and collective mobilization is the 2024 protests against Kenya's Finance Bill, where digital platforms played a significant role in organizing, communicating, and mobilizing citizens. The Constitution of Kenya (2010), recognizes and protects the rights of citizens to hold peaceful demonstrations and express opinion freely. However, during protests security agencies are constantly in conflict with protesters with concerns of excessive use of force, unlawful arrests, internet restrictions that deny citizens of their right to free expression reported. Given the unpredictable nature of digitally mobilized protests, concerns have arisen regarding the adequacy and effectiveness of existing public order management strategies in responding to rapidly evolving protest dynamics.

One of the key challenges facing public order management in Kenya is the disconnect between conventional policing approaches and the evolving nature of digitally coordinated protests. Public order management depends largely on conventional approaches such as physical intelligence, crowd control, centralized command and control structure. These approaches are becoming progressively inadequate in responding to decentralized and rapidly organized online mobilization. According to Amnesty International (2025), security agencies in Kenya are more focused on reactive and forceful responses rather than resorting to digital technologies and citizen engagement approaches. The current wave of protests is characterized by mistrust between security institutions and Gen Z protestors. This study therefore explores

how security institutions are dealing with the challenge of digitally coordinated protests. It also focuses on the institutions involved in managing protests, the communication approaches, digital surveillance mechanisms as well as the operational practices of security agencies. Thus, the study relies on a wide range of policy papers, press releases, official statements as well as human rights reports.

This journal further examines the relationship between public order management and the emerging phenomenon of digital-era protests in Kenya. The effective management of public order involves the use of laws, policies and institutions to maintain peace and stability, while respecting constitutional rights. Security can thus be delivered in a professional, proportional, communicative and community-oriented manner. Nonetheless, studies by Human Rights Watch (2024a) and Kenya National Commission on Human Rights highlight several areas for enhancement in protest policing, including the need for additional training, strengthened accountability mechanisms, greater institutional independence, and improved preparedness for managing digitally coordinated demonstrations. This study therefore contributes to discussions on security governance, democratic policing and digital activism, by arguing that law enforcement agencies must adopt adaptive, inclusive and rights-based engagement mechanisms to effectively manage protests in the digital age. The findings are expected to provide recommendations to law enforcement agencies and other institutions on improving police-community relations as well as how to effectively manage protests in a democratic manner in Kenya and beyond.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The management of public order by law enforcement agencies during the recent “Gen Z” protests across the country has brought attention to areas requiring further strengthening within law enforcement agencies, despite the constitutionally guaranteed right to assembly. A range of traditional practices of policing protests which were designed to manage organized, physical and largely predictable events are increasingly strained by the rapid, decentralized, and real-time nature of social media-driven mobilization. Consequently, security agencies have encountered challenges in predicting protest patterns, controlling crowd behavior, and responding appropriately to rapidly changing situations without intensifying tensions. Reports, human rights monitoring and assessments available on the issue of public order management in Kenya by law enforcement agencies in the digital era reveal the challenges confronting the security agencies. The challenges include lack of digital intelligence, relevant training on managing modern protests, understanding of crowd psychology and online campaigning. In some cases, there is also an inequality in the application of the law and human rights and use of excessive force against protesters with subsequent adverse reactions against law enforcement agencies (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights [KNCHR], 2024). This indicates a growing gap between traditional methods of maintaining public order and new ways of policing protests in the digital age. This problem requires in-depth analysis on how various law enforcement agencies in Kenya are addressing these issues as well as how they are evolving to effectively manage, lawfully regulate and accountably deal with emerging digital public protests.

1.2 Research Question

How can Kenya’s law enforcement agencies adapt public order management strategies to effectively and lawfully respond to digitally coordinated Gen Z protests while strengthening institutional legitimacy, accountability, and public trust?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study was grounded on the governance theory and the procedural justice theory. Each of these theories key tenets are explored hereunder.

2.1.1 Governance Theory

Governance Theory and Procedural Justice Theory offer an appropriate framework for analyzing the institutional context of digital-era protests and the manner in which policing practices influence the perceived legitimacy of digitally networked citizens and their engagement with the state. Governance Theory was developed by scholars such as Kooiman (1993), Rhodes (1996), and Osborne (2010). According to this theory, in today’s highly complex and interconnected policy environment, managing public order is affected by interactions between the State, civil society and other non-State actors. Governance, viewed from a traditional State-centric angle, is managed by government institutions within a hierarchical framework and implemented through them. From a governance perspective, however, in addition to civil society, the media and digitally networked digitally savvy citizens are key players. Thus, public order management is not merely a matter of the State trying to assert control instead, it is about trying to coordinate, negotiate and collaborate in order to manage public security in a changing environment.

Governance Theory is relevant to this study on digital-era protests in Kenya as public order management increasingly involves the participation of both state and non-state actors, especially in the digital age. Formal governance actors, including the National Police Service, manage public order within an environment where new forms and actors of governance are emerging. Thus, their interactions are governed by new legitimacy criteria. In addition to ensuring that the management of a legal protest is lawfully conducted, formal governance is expected to provide transparent, accountable and fair governance to citizen-organized protests, so as to have upper hand in their interactions with Gen Z-led protests that are highly organized through social media platforms so as to manage their interactions with institutions of governance (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. [OECD], 2024). Furthermore, governance theory explains how state legitimacy can be strengthened or weakened in the management of public protests. When governments and police services act proportionately and within the constitutional rights of demonstrators, they are more likely to enhance public trust through mechanisms such as dialogue and engagement with citizens. However, when state actors go beyond the limits of lawful and legitimate use of force, particularly where such actions are accompanied by impunity, the trust and cooperation that underpin effective governance can quickly decline. This concern becomes even more significant during digitally visible protests, where events are recorded, shared and discussed almost immediately, placing the actions of both state and non-state actors under continuous public scrutiny.

2.1.2 Procedural Justice Theory

This article also employs Procedural Justice Theory, developed through the work of Tyler (1988, 1990, 2006, 2017), to understand how citizens perceive and judge the conduct of security agencies. Tyler (2017) argues that people are more likely to regard police and other authorities as legitimate when they feel that they have been treated fairly, respectfully and according to established procedures and rules. This perspective is particularly relevant to protests in the digital era, where police actions can be recorded and shared widely on social media within moments. As a result, public perceptions of fairness can develop almost immediately and may influence how protests unfold. When police actions are perceived as excessive or unfair, they can trigger public criticism and further weaken confidence in the police. Conversely, when officers act respectfully, fairly and in accordance with people's rights, their conduct can help strengthen public trust, even during periods of heightened tension and difficult circumstances. Thus, Procedural Justice Theory establishes a direct relationship between law enforcement conduct during protests and broader outcomes, including legitimacy, compliance, and public trust. Governance Theory and Procedural Justice Theory provides a relevant framework for examining the governance environment surrounding digital protests and the police actions which affect the legitimacy of digitally connected citizens and their interactions with the state. Governance Theory help understand the networked relations between citizens and the state within the context of digital-era of protest. Procedural Justice Theory, on the other hand, outlines citizens perceptions of fairness and resulting legitimacy outcomes that affect levels of trust, compliance and protest behaviour towards police and government. Bringing these two theories together helps analyse how the law enforcement in Kenya responds to digital protests by Gen Z and how their actions shape public order and the legitimacy of institutions.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Digital Mobilization and Gen Z Protest Dynamics

Digital activism has changed the way young people participate in civic and political activities. The spread of information through such as X, TikTok, WhatsApp and Facebook has changed how people participate in activism and organize collectively, allowing them to mobilize outside formal organizations and established structures. This was evident during Kenya's 2024 Gen Z protests, when young people relied heavily on digital platforms to express their grievances, share information and coordinate protest activities. Amnesty International (2025) reports that these platforms played an important role in mobilizing young activists, while Human Rights Watch (2025a) observes that online mobilization contributed to the rapid spread of protests across the country. Unlike traditional protests, which are often organized by identifiable leaders or formal groups, digitally driven mobilization tends to involve loose and flexible networks that can coordinate quickly when necessary. This presents a challenge to conventional policing approaches, which have traditionally depended on identifying protest organizers and anticipating demonstrations at particular times and locations. Digital platforms, however, have become important for more than simply organizing protests. They have also become important spaces where events are recorded, shared and discussed as they happen. Protesters, journalists and members of the public can quickly circulate information about what is taking place, bringing the actions of both protesters and security agencies under public scrutiny. Amnesty International (2025) also raises concerns about the use of digital technologies in ways that may expose young activists to surveillance, harassment and other forms of technology-facilitated intimidation. This creates a difficult environment for law enforcement because agencies need to understand emerging patterns of mobilisation while at the same time respecting rights such as freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Existing literature therefore demonstrates the growing influence of digital platforms on protest

mobilisation, but there is still a need for greater understanding of how law enforcement can adjust its intelligence, communication and engagement practices to respond to these changes.

2.2.2 Law Enforcement Responses to Digital-Era Protests

Recent literature on protest policing increasingly supports approaches that emphasise dialogue, communication, de-escalation, proportionality and respect for peaceful assembly. These approaches differ from traditional methods that tend to place greater emphasis on controlling and dispersing crowds. In Kenya, however, evidence from recent demonstrations suggests that conventional enforcement practices continue to influence the management of public protests. Human Rights Watch (2024b), for example, documented concerns relating to excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and other alleged violations during the 2023 anti-government protests. These concerns are important because they show that weaknesses in protest policing existed before the emergence of the Gen Z protests. The challenges associated with the 2024–2025 demonstrations therefore need to be understood within this wider history of public order management rather than being attributed entirely to digital mobilisation. The Gen Z protests nevertheless introduced new operational difficulties because people could mobilise quickly through digital networks without depending on a central leadership structure. Human Rights Watch (2025a) and Amnesty International (2025) reported concerns relating to police use of force, arrests and other aspects of the security response during this period. This suggests that relying mainly on crowd control after tensions have already developed may not be adequate in an environment where protest activity can change within a short time. This does not mean that intelligence-led policing is no longer relevant. Rather, existing approaches may need to be broadened to include awareness of digital mobilisation, early communication with protesters, dialogue and de-escalation. The key issue is therefore how these approaches can be incorporated into Kenya's public order management system while ensuring that police actions remain lawful, necessary and proportionate.

2.2.3 Institutional Preparedness and Adaptive Public Order Management

Institutional preparedness is central to effective public order management because demonstrations can develop quickly and may change considerably within a short period. While structures for command and control of policing operations are critical in ensuring effective policing in public order situations, they may be insufficient in decentralized protests which are constantly evolving as information is conveyed on digital platforms. Such is the nature of contemporary governance where increasingly interaction and cooperation are required between government, institutions other actors (Osborne, 2010). Independent Policing Oversight Authority [IPOA] (2023) and Kenya National Commission on Human Rights [KNCHR] (2024) have highlighted several challenges in Kenya's policing system, particularly in relation to police operations, accountability and the management of public protests. Effective preparedness for protests, however, involves much more than simply deploying a large number of police officers. It also depends on the ability of relevant institutions to gather and share information, coordinate their responses, communicate clearly with the public and identify potential signs of unrest early enough to take appropriate action. These factors are therefore central to determining how well a policing institution is prepared to manage public protests. Existing literature suggests that managing Gen Z-led protests requires public order institutions to develop capabilities that go beyond conventional preparedness measures. The speed at which information spreads through digital platforms means that major events can gain attention within minutes, with protesters and members of the public sharing information about locations, routes and developments as they occur. In such circumstances, law enforcement agencies need appropriate capacity to identify and analyse relevant digital information, strengthen cooperation among institutions, develop effective early warning mechanisms and equip officers with appropriate communication and de-escalation skills. At the same time, these capabilities must be exercised within the limits of the Constitution so that efforts to anticipate or prevent protests do not become a means of restricting legitimate civic and political participation. The key challenge, therefore, is determining how these capabilities can be integrated into Kenya's existing public order management system while creating more flexible approaches for responding to digitally coordinated protests.

2.2.4 Institutional Legitimacy, Accountability and Public Trust

Public trust in police and other law enforcement agencies is closely influenced by how they handle public demonstrations and how their actions are perceived by citizens. Tyler (2017) notes that people are more likely to accept the authority of an institution when they feel that they have been treated with respect. This is particularly important in protest policing, where citizens judge police conduct not only by whether order is restored, but also by how demonstrators are treated throughout the process. In Kenya, concerns have been raised over excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, injuries and weaknesses in police accountability during protests (Human Rights Watch, 2024c; KNCHR, 2024). Public order management should therefore go beyond simply dispersing protesters or restoring calm, since the manner in which this is achieved can either strengthen or undermine public confidence. Police actions that are lawful, necessary and proportionate are more likely to promote public trust and reinforce institutional legitimacy. The growing use of digital platforms has further increased public visibility of police conduct, allowing people who are not

physically present at demonstrations to access, share and discuss information about events almost immediately. Amnesty International (2025) and Human Rights Watch (2025b), for instance, have documented protest experiences and reported police violations through their digital platforms. Although previous research has established a relationship between police conduct, procedural fairness, accountability and institutional legitimacy, less attention has been given to how these elements can be incorporated into public order management before, during and after demonstrations. This study therefore considers police accountability and institutional legitimacy alongside preparedness and the capacity of law enforcement agencies to adapt to changing public order situations.

2.2.5 Public Order Management Challenges in Kenya

Kenya's approach to public order management is anchored in the Constitution (2010), the National Police Service Act (2011) and the Public Order Act (Cap. 56), which together provide a legal basis for maintaining public order while protecting fundamental human rights. Despite this framework, recent demonstrations have continued to reveal difficulties in translating these legal protections into practice. Human Rights Watch (2024b), for example, reported cases of alleged excessive use of force and arbitrary arrests during the 2023 protests, while similar concerns were raised by Amnesty International (2025), Human Rights Watch (2025b) and KNCHR (2024) in relation to the 2024–2025 protests. These incidents should not be viewed only as isolated occurrences, as they may point to broader challenges within Kenya's public order management system. In particular, they raise questions about the preparedness of law enforcement agencies, the practical implementation of legal safeguards and the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms. The recent Gen Z protests in Kenya have added a new dimension to public order management, particularly because digital networks can facilitate rapid mobilization without relying on formal organizations or clearly identified leaders. This differs from the protest patterns that public order institutions have traditionally managed, where demonstrations could often be anticipated through established intelligence and identifiable structures. At the same time, increased monitoring of citizens' online activities raises an important question about how the government can protect national security while respecting fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, privacy and peaceful assembly. Although Kenya has an established legal framework for managing public order, questions remain about whether law enforcement agencies have the capacity and flexibility to apply it effectively in the changing digital environment. Addressing these challenges requires a more adaptive approach that strengthens understanding of digital spaces, improves coordination and communication among relevant stakeholders, promotes dialogue and de-escalation, and reinforces accountability and respect for human rights as provided for in the Constitution.

2.3 Empirical Gap

Existing literature has provided useful information on digital mobilisation, protest policing, institutional preparedness and police legitimacy. However, these areas have often been considered separately rather than as interconnected aspects of public order management. Studies and institutional reports on the 2024–2025 Gen Z protests show that digital platforms have changed the speed, organisation and visibility of collective action. Other reports have focused on police use of force, arrests, accountability and the protection of fundamental rights. Although these studies are valuable, they provide limited explanation of how the changing nature of digital mobilisation affects institutional preparedness and how law enforcement agencies can adjust their practices accordingly. There is also limited integrated evidence on how digital intelligence, inter-agency coordination, communication, dialogue, de-escalation, procedural fairness and accountability can operate together within Kenya's public order management framework. Existing literature recognises the importance of each of these elements, but does not sufficiently explain how they can be combined to support an effective and lawful response to digitally coordinated protests. This study addresses this gap by bringing these dimensions together and exploring how Kenya's law enforcement agencies can adapt public order management strategies to respond effectively and lawfully to digitally coordinated Gen Z protests while strengthening institutional legitimacy, accountability and public trust.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative documentary research design. Since public order management and protests in the digital-era are social phenomena that are complex and still not fully understood, a qualitative research design was considered more appropriate than a quantitative approach that focuses on numerical data or measurements (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Qualitative research design is more appropriate as it allows for an in-depth study of practices and governance structures and their legitimacy within protest policing without relying on primary data. As digital activism and crowd mobilization in Kenya is fast evolving, qualitative document analysis presents the best approach of identifying and interpreting literature, policy frameworks, and institutional reports (Amnesty International, 2025).

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Secondary data was obtained from a wide array of credible sources that specialize in constitutional and legal information, government publications and human rights reports. This data includes academic articles published in journals and peer reviewed academic literature. Some of the documents reviewed included; the Constitution of Kenya (2010), the National Police Service Act, the Public Order Act and other enabling laws that direct public order management. Moreover, publications from Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR, 2024) and Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA, 2023) that scrutinize accountability and oversight of the police in management of protests were included. The study also included insights from International human rights reports, particularly from Amnesty International (2025) and Human Rights Watch (2025a), in relation to the policing of protest. Academic journal articles and policy studies on topics such as digital activism and policing, provide useful insight on Gen Z-led digital mobilization in Kenya and how it is managed by both state and non-state actors. In total 35-40 highly relevant documents, published between 2017 and 2025 were selected through a systematic and transparent process.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysed in the study were qualitative and were therefore subjected to qualitative content and thematic analysis. The thematic analysis utilized was guided by a hybrid deductive–inductive approach, where the deductive coding was based on Governance Theory and Procedural Justice Theory focusing on issues of institutional coordination, legitimacy, fairness in policing and public trust (Tyler, 2017; Bevir, 2012). The inductive coding was employed in analyzing data to derive themes from the data. The themes included; digital mobilization strategies used by protest groups, increase in protest violence, use of force by police, accountability gaps within policing institutions and ways through which social media is utilized to shape the public's perceptions on policing. Thematic analysis also revealed the relationships between the law enforcement practices and their resulting legitimacy in Gen Z protests that are digitally coordinated. To strengthen the credibility and consistency of the findings, the study also triangulated the evidence with information drawn from publications by KNCHR (2024), Amnesty International (2025) and Human Rights Watch (2025).

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were given particular attention in this secondary data study. All sources used in the research were properly acknowledged and referenced to maintain academic integrity and avoid plagiarism, in line with established research ethics (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Given the sensitivity of the subject, particularly reports concerning protest violence and the conduct of law enforcement agencies, information was cross-checked across credible sources to provide a balanced interpretation. Evidence from organisations such as KNCHR (2024) and Human Rights Watch (2025) was therefore considered alongside other relevant sources. This approach helped ensure that the analysis presented in the study was fair, balanced and supported by credible evidence.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Digital Mobilisation and the Changing Nature of Gen Z Protests

The findings indicate that Gen Z protests in Kenya are increasingly shaped by digital platforms such as X, TikTok and WhatsApp. These platforms allow young people to share information, voice their grievances and organize protest activities within a short period, often without relying on formal organizations or recognized leaders. Amnesty International (2025) highlights the important role of online spaces in the 2024–2025 protests, while Human Rights Watch (2025) similarly points to their growing use for both organizing and documenting protest activities. This changing pattern of mobilization presents difficulties for conventional approaches to public order management, which have traditionally depended on identifying protest leaders and organizers, gathering intelligence through established channels and anticipating demonstrations based on known patterns. The findings also show that social media has become an important means of recording and sharing what happens during protests, including interactions between demonstrators and police officers. Protesters, members of the public and journalists can capture events and circulate images or videos within minutes, making police actions visible to a much wider audience. This has increased public scrutiny of the conduct of both protesters and law enforcement officers. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) explain that digital networks can facilitate forms of collective action that are flexible and less dependent on formal organizational structures. For public order management in Kenya, this suggests the need to recognize both the speed with which digital mobilization can develop and the decentralized nature of collective action that it enables.

4.1.2 Law Enforcement Response and Public Order Management

The findings suggest that law enforcement agencies often respond to protests in a reactive manner, with much of the focus placed on crowd control and dispersal once a situation has already escalated. Reports by Human Rights Watch (2024, 2025), Amnesty International (2025) and KNCHR (2024) have raised concerns about the use of force, arrests of protesters and broader approaches to managing demonstrations. However, the rapid nature of digitally coordinated protests, which can grow or change direction within minutes, calls for a broader approach to public order management. Alongside maintaining order, law enforcement agencies need to identify and address potential points of tension early through timely communication, engagement and other appropriate forms of intervention. This does not mean that traditional policing methods have become irrelevant. Rather, existing approaches need to be complemented by strategies that reflect the changing nature of protests and public disorder in the digital era. Intelligence-led policing, for instance, can be strengthened through greater digital awareness among officers, timely information sharing, dialogue and de-escalation skills. In practice, this may involve engaging with those planning demonstrations and other relevant stakeholders at an early stage to understand the situation as it develops. Such engagement can help law enforcement distinguish between peaceful protest and circumstances that may require enforcement action, while also allowing them to respond more appropriately to emerging risks. Where the use of force becomes necessary, it should remain lawful, necessary and proportionate to the circumstances.

4.1.3 Institutional Preparedness and Adaptive Capacity

New demands are also being placed on law enforcement institutions as new forms of digitally organized protests are emerging. To respond effectively, these institutions need a clearer understanding of how digital mobilization develops and how information can be shared quickly across agencies. Police officers also require relevant skills to deal with situations that may emerge or change unexpectedly during a protest. Osborne (2010) notes that contemporary governance increasingly depends on cooperation and flexibility among state and non-state actors, an approach that is particularly relevant to public order management in the digital era. In Kenya, IPOA (2023) and KNCHR (2024) have highlighted a number of challenges relating to policing, accountability and the management of public gatherings. Strengthening institutional capacity therefore requires improved coordination between relevant agencies, appropriate training and effective early warning systems. It also calls for greater capacity among law enforcement agencies to engage with protesters and other stakeholders through dialogue and to use de-escalation where appropriate. The findings also point to continued concerns about the use of force during public demonstrations. Amnesty International (2025), Human Rights Watch (2024, 2025) and KNCHR (2024) have documented allegations involving excessive force, injuries, deaths and arrests during different periods of protest. This shows that successful public order management cannot simply be judged by whether a crowd has been dispersed or whether a situation has been brought under control. It is equally important to consider whether police actions are lawful, necessary and proportionate, and whether the constitutional right to peaceful assembly is respected. The evidence therefore supports a shift towards rights-based and de-escalatory approaches rather than an overreliance on force.

4.1.4 Accountability, Procedural Justice and Institutional Legitimacy

How law enforcement agencies treat protesters can have a direct bearing on how the public views their conduct and legitimacy. Reports from Human Rights Watch (2024, 2025), Amnesty International (2025) and KNCHR (2024) have raised concerns about police conduct, arrests, the use of force and the handling of complaints during demonstrations in Kenya. Where such concerns are not adequately investigated or addressed, members of the public may feel that officers are not being held responsible for their actions, which can gradually erode confidence in law enforcement institutions. Tyler's (2017) Procedural Justice Theory provides a useful explanation for this relationship, arguing that people are more likely to accept institutional authority when they believe they have been treated fairly, respectfully and impartially. Accountability should therefore not be treated as an issue that arises only after a protest has ended, but should form part of the entire process of planning, managing and reviewing public demonstrations. The widespread use of digital platforms has added another dimension to accountability during protests. Today, protesters, journalists and members of the public can record police actions and circulate the material to large audiences within a very short time. Amnesty International (2025) and Human Rights Watch (2025) illustrate how digital platforms have been used to document experiences during protests and draw attention to alleged abuses. This means that the conduct of individual officers can quickly shape perceptions of the police institution as a whole. Where policing is perceived as excessive, unfair or lacking transparency, public trust may decline. Conversely, open communication, respectful treatment, proportionate use of enforcement powers and credible investigations can contribute to rebuilding confidence. The findings therefore indicate that institutional legitimacy is shaped not only by whether police are able to maintain public order, but also by whether they exercise their authority in a manner that is fair, transparent and accountable.

4.1.5 Comparison with Extant Literature

The findings are generally in agreement with existing literature on digital mobilisation, governance, democratic policing and procedural justice. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) demonstrate how digital networks can facilitate decentralised forms of collective action, while Osborne (2010) highlights the importance of flexibility and cooperation in contemporary governance. Tyler (2017) similarly shows that procedural fairness plays an important role in shaping perceptions of police legitimacy. Evidence from Amnesty International (2025), Human Rights Watch (2024, 2025), IPOA (2023) and KNCHR (2024) also points to continuing challenges surrounding protest policing, use of force, accountability and the protection of rights in Kenya. The present study, however, brings these issues together by highlighting the gap between the rapidly changing nature of digitally coordinated protests and the ability of existing public order management institutions to respond to these changes. Although previous studies have discussed digital mobilisation, police responses, accountability and legitimacy, these issues are often considered independently. The findings of this study indicate that they are closely connected. Institutional preparedness, understanding of digital mobilisation, early engagement, de-escalation, procedural fairness and accountability should therefore be treated as complementary components of an effective public order management approach.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This journal examines how law enforcement responds to Gen Z-led digital-era protests in Kenya, by focusing on preparedness of law enforcement institutions, practices, use of force and perceptions of legitimacy within the parameters of the constitutional and legal frameworks on public order management. Such frameworks exist in form of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) and the National Police Service Act (2011). However, despite existence of these frameworks, their implementation in managing digitally coordinated protests is generally carried out in a reactive, inconsistent and forceful manner. The mobilisation of Gen Z protesters is decentralised and largely organised through digital platforms, which creates challenges for conventional intelligence-led policing. Recent reports by Amnesty International (2025) and Human Rights Watch (2025) document cases of injuries and deaths of protesters as well as excessive use of force by governments' security forces during protests. Additionally, the study exposed existing institutional gaps in policing institutions in regards to digital intelligence, crowd psychology as well as real time monitoring systems against the backdrop of fast changing dynamics of protests and resultant mismatch with policing capabilities. Accordingly, these shortcomings adversely impact procedural fairness and considerably weaken public confidence in law enforcement institutions, aligning with Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (2024) findings on diminished perceptions of fairness and accountability in protest management contexts. Overall, public order management in the digital era can benefit from a paradigm shift of a police force-centered, reactive approach to a proactive, intelligence-driven, rights-oriented approach of dialogue, transparency and accountability. To increase police legitimacy and manage public events in a peaceful and successful way, institutional preparedness has to be enhanced and police practice needs to be aligned with principles of procedural justice.

5.2 Recommendations

To improve public order management in the digital era, the National Police Service (NPS), working together with the Ministry of Interior and the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI), should strengthen its capacity for digital intelligence and early warning. This would help law enforcement agencies identify emerging protest mobilization and respond before tensions escalate. At the same time, formal dialogue mechanisms should be established between the police, county officials, civil society organizations, youth representatives and community leaders to create opportunities for addressing grievances and reducing tensions before and during demonstrations. Greater support is also needed for oversight institutions such as the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA) and the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), including adequate resources and stronger enforcement capacity to improve accountability. The NPS should further promote transparency by providing timely information to the public, properly documenting decisions made during crowd management and conducting post-protest reporting. Finally, regular training in de-escalation, negotiation, procedural justice, crowd management and the proportionate use of force should be strengthened to support rights-based policing and improve relations between the police and the public.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.



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